

Early Ballooning

The first instantaneous photograph from the car of a free-floating balloon by Cecil Shadbolt

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Undoubtedly, Cecil Shadbolt's major achievement was his photograph of Stamford Hill, London, taken from a free-floating balloon. As far as I know, this is the earliest (1) extant successful true vertical picture of the earth taken from the air. For this one image alone, Shadbolt deserves, and has received (2), a place in the history of photography. For this reason the circumstances surrounding this photograph and Shadbolt's life and death are worthy of note.

Cecil Victor Shadbolt was born in 1859, the son of George Shadbolt. For those involved in the history of photography, his father's name will explain young Cecil's early interest and success in the medium. George was one of the founders of the Photographic Society of London in 1853. During the winter of this year he began making extremely minute photographs, or microphotographs, and read a paper on his methods to the Photographic Society at its first session of 1857 (3). Shadbolt senior was a pioneer in this field of photography. He was an independent inventor of the honey process (4) for preserving wet-plates and an early advocate of enlarging from small negatives (5). As one magazine put it so succinctly, he was:

"An active member of the Photographic Society, at one time sitting at its council table, a ready and skillful debater, an ardent experimentalist, having a wide acquaintance with the physical sciences, and a cultivated gentleman, he rapidly took high rank among the representative votaries of the new art-science."(6)

His society and editorial work was extensive. He served on the Photographic Society's committee (7) investigating the fading of prints (along with Hugh Diamond and Philip Delamotte), founded the South London Photographic Society (8) in 1859, acted as council member for the Amateur Photographic Association (the President of which was The Prince of Wales), served as Vice-President of the North London Photographic Association, and finally, edited *The British Journal of Photography* for about seven years from 1857 to 1864. In 1865 a testimonial "of esteem and respect, as a souvenir of his long public connection with photography", was presented to him by some of the leading photographers of the day, including J. Trail Taylor, H. P. Robinson, and A. Melhuish. (9)

It was right in the middle of George Shadbolt's most active years that Cecil was born, in 1859. It is no wonder that he would quickly master both the art and science of photography in such a home atmosphere. By the age of 23:

"Shadbolt was a photographer of the highest rank, and he had won a number of medals, at exhibitions held in various parts of the country." (10)

His most successful year was probably in 1882, when six of his photographs, views of The Thames, The West Indian Docks (London), Stybarrow Crag (Ullswater), The Stepping Stones (Ambleside), The Old Mill (Ambleside), and Ullswater from Patterdale, were exhibited at the Photographic Society of Great Britain. (11) The most significant fact about this exhibition is that the Catalogue of Photographs includes an "On the Table" section in which we find:

"no. 471. Instantaneous Map Photograph taken from the Car of a Balloon, 2,000 feet high, by...Cecil V. Shadbolt."

The significance of this entry is that the two publications dealing with the history of aerial photography, and previously cited, date Shadbolt's picture as having been made one year later, 1883. This is one of those puzzles that intrigue historians. The facts, as near as I am able to reconstruct them, are as follows:

Cecil Shadbolt, an accomplished photographer, and familiar with the leading writers and literature of the medium, would have known of previous attempts to take aerial views from balloons, including those by James Wallace Black of Boston in 1860, and by Nadar of Paris in 1858. Shadbolt would certainly have been familiar with the balloon ascents of Henry Coxwell and James Glaisher in 1862, since they were enthusiastically reported in every British photographic journal, including his father's periodical. The same magazines reported every new development in every balloonists' efforts to secure aerial photographs. By 1882, ballooning was not restricted to fanatical (and rich) aeronauts or those sponsored scientific research ascents. (12) In fact ballooning was promising to become "a fashionable amusement." (13) Several attempts were made to secure photographs from the basket of a free floating balloon between 1880 and 1882 but they were "entire failures". Cecil Shadbolt determined that he would make the attempt. He stated:

"...up to the time of undertaking the trip in question it had never been my good fortune to meet with any satisfactory photograph taken from a balloon, and, having a decided preference for practical results rather than for any amount of theory, I had long cherished the desire of making an ascent accompanied by my camera." (14)

His opportunity occurred on the bank holiday of June 1882. "The young London merchant" traveled to the Alexandra Palace where he met a Mr. Barker, who owned the balloon "Reliance". Shadbolt attached his camera to the side of the car "by means of an arrangement I had rigged-up in order to enable the instrument to be fixed at any desired angle from the side of the car." (15) The camera was fitted with a simple flap, enabling a maximum shutter speed of one-quarter to half-a-second, hardly fast enough to eliminate the effects of the balloon's gyrations. His exposures were made on Wratten's extra-sensitive dry plates with a Ross 8x5 inch rapid symmetrical lens. It was Shadbolt's third exposure that was the most successful of the ascent:

"when just over the district of Stamford Hill, at which point the barometer recorded an altitude of 2,000 feet. In the resulting picture the streets, railways, and houses below are clearly distinguishable. In this view, also, can be seen the vehicles beneath, while people walking on the pathways, although almost too small to be recognizable, are nevertheless to be distinguished." (16)

This is undoubtedly the photograph exhibited at the Photographic Society of Great Britain in October of the same year and corresponds to the description of Shadbolt's photograph in Tissandier's book. Tissandier noted:

"You can clearly distinguish the railroad, and the junction of the Enfield track of the Great Eastern Railway with the Tottenham and Hampstead line. A railroad bridge crossing the road can be seen; its shadow is very clear and gives it remarkable relief. A train in motion, with smoke coming out of the locomotive, can be recognized, and farther on a house, which is of incomparable sharpness. With a magnifying glass you can distinguish, on the original photograph, all its details - chimneys, interior courts, etc. The other parts of the photograph show the roofs of houses lined up with regularity one beside another, their gardens all alike and of the same size, as is the English custom. You can also see, on the left, fields cut-up into farms." (17)

If this is the same photograph described by Shadbolt, which is most likely (18), then we can date the first successful vertical view of the earth from a free-floating balloon to have been taken in June 1882, not one year later as Tissandier states, and from the balloon "Reliance", not "Sunbeam", which is mentioned in both Tissandier's and Newhall's publications. The confusion is possibly attributed to the fact that this photograph by Shadbolt was also exhibited in the 1883 exhibition of the Photographic Society of London, where it first attracted Tissandier's attention.

Not only had Shadbolt produced "the first recognizable picture from cloud-land" (19) but he had done so on his very first ascension in a balloon and his first attempt at aerial photography. Shadbolt's was certainly not the "first recognizable" picture from the air but we can attribute this exaggeration to over-enthusiasm for the achievement of the son of a former editor. The Photographic News was more subdued, and more accurate, in remarking that his photograph:

"although not quite equal to M. Nadar's picture (20) of the roofs of Paris, Mr. Cecil V. Shadbolt's view taken near Stamford Hill is undoubtedly the best specimen of balloon photography which has been done in this country." (21)

W. H. Lefevre, C.E., President of the Balloon Society of Great Britain, considered Shadbolt's picture: "The most successful balloon photograph which he had ever seen." (22)

Fired with such early success, Cecil Shadbolt enthusiastically continued his ballooning activities, buying a new craft, the "Sunbeam", in partnership with William Dale, who acted as colleague and helper on most of his future ascensions. Throughout the spring and

summer of 1883, Shadbolt attempted to improve on his first aerial view - without success. By May 1883 he had to confess that "nothing in any way superior to previous results was obtained" (23); by August: "In all (photographs) I have made this year, the hour has unfortunately been unfavorable for photographic operations." (24) These remarks confirm that the Stamford Hill balloon picture was made in June 1882, and not 1883, from the balloon "Reliance", before "Sunbeam" was built. In June 1884 a third balloon was launched by Shadbolt and Dale, the "Monarch". In August Shadbolt could write: "At length, I think I have quite equaled, if not surpassed, my achievement of 1882" [author's emphasis]. (25) One of these photographs, "Blackheath, from an elevation of 2,700 feet," taken from the basket of "Monarch" was used as an illustration by Tissandier for his book *Photographie en Balloon*, and reproduced in *The Photographic News* (26) of 1884, above an interesting Meisenbach block of Shadbolt sitting in the basket, camera fixed to its side, with Dale standing alongside. (27)

It was from the "Monarch" that Shadbolt made his most successful aerial photographs, using them to illustrate lantern slide lectures in ballooning, for example at the South London Photographic Society in March 1885. The photographic press reported his future failures as well as successes and even national newspapers found his exploits newsworthy.(28) Altogether, Cecil Shadbolt made 67 ascents and was considered one of Britain's most experienced balloonists. His death was tragic and dramatic.

On the 29 June 1892, at the Crystal Palace in front of an audience of 24,000 spectators, Cecil Shadbolt went through the familiar chore of inflating a balloon and preparing for its ascent. The passengers were Captain Dale (a well-known aeronaut), his 19-year-old son William, John Macintosh (a banker's clerk) and Shadbolt. Everything was ready at 5:45 pm. Captain Dale shouted "Let's go" and the balloon rose quickly, reaching an altitude of 600 feet within a few minutes.

"The crowds of spectators in the grounds were eagerly following the course of the balloon, when, all in a moment, they were horrified to see it collapse.... Deprived of its buoyancy, the balloon came down like a rag. The occupants could be distinctly seen vainly struggling against the dreadful fall which awaited them, madly throwing out ballast bags and everything which could possibly lighten the car. Some ideas may be formed of their efforts by the fact that they wrenched buttons from their clothing....The balloon fell with a sickening thud on the green sward..." (29)

Captain Dale was killed almost instantly. The other three aeronauts were taken to the hospital in critical condition. The Times followed their medical progress and letters appeared in the newspaper's correspondence columns on the possible causes of the accident. (30) A few days later Cecil Shadbolt died of his injuries:

"Mr. Shadbolt's death was as beautiful (sic) as his life had been. On awakening from a long unconsciousness which followed his being dashed to the earth with the burst balloon, he found himself in an agony of suffering - suffering which lasted during nine days of lingering. But with all the pain of that poor shattered body of his, there was not once complaint or impatience." (31)

It would be unfair to end this brief note on the life and work of Cecil V. Shadbolt without reference to his activities other than ballooning. We have already seen that he was an accomplished photographer of a more pictorial vein, exhibiting views of the English Lake District and of London at the Photographic Society of Great Britain. It was his interest in photography that first led him to his ballooning experiences; similarly, photography was inextricably linked with his other passion, the church. A committed Christian, Shadbolt was an active proselyte, first as a Sunday School teacher, then as one of the Secretaries of the Western Kent Sunday School Union. The impression of Shadbolt's personality which clearly emerges from various references to his life is one of cool rationality, engaging in any project with care and attention to detail, a reliable if introvert young man, not prone to rashness or unpredictability, modest and quiet of speech and habit. This does not sound like a daring young aeronaut - but it does sound like a useful companion for a risky ascent in a homemade balloon. During the 1880s (the exact date is unclear) Cecil Shadbolt visited Palestine.

This visit was in the manner of a pilgrimage, seeing personally the locations of Jesus' life. Shadbolt photographed many of these sites, including the orange groves at Jaffa, Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, The Garden of Gethsemane, The Mount of Olives, Bethlehem, The Mount of Temptation, Rachel's Tomb, and similar views. They are strong, quiet images, carefully composed and intelligently crafted. In other words, they reflect Shadbolt's personality. In that sense they are illuminating. These images are not historical milestones; they were not the 'first' to have been taken at these sites; they do not break new ground stylistically; they were not made by any unusual process. They conform to the aesthetic taste of the 1880s. Within these parameters Shadbolt's Palestinian pictures are fine photographs.

Fifteen of these images were used to illustrate, by the photogravure process, *Walks in Palestine* by Henry A. Harper. The first edition of this book was issued in 1888; the second edition was issued two years after Shadbolt's death and included a small halftone portrait (32) and a two-page memoir of the late photographer. If this eulogy is short on facts it is long on praise to this "cultured, gifted, happy servant of Christ". But this image of saintliness should come as no surprise since *Walks in Palestine* was published by the Religious Tract Society and authored by Henry Andrew Harper, a prolific writer and illustrator on Biblical and religious topics. (33)

If Shadbolt's balloon picture of 1882 has historical interest it seems appropriate that his epitaph should appear in a book containing his pictures of Palestine. George Shadbolt survived his son by nine years, dying "at a very advanced age" (34) in June 1901.

Notes and references:

1. There is some discrepancy over the date of this image, as will be discussed later.
2. A chapter on Shadbolt's balloon photograph was included in *La Photographie en Balloon*, by Gaston Tissandier, Paris, 1886, pp.19-21. Shadbolt is also mentioned in *Airborne Camera*, by Beaumont Newhall, New York, 1969.
3. *The Liverpool and Manchester Photographic Journal*, Vol. 1, 1857, pp. 244-245.

4. The Journal of the Photographic Society, 21 January 1857, pp. 205-206.
5. The Photographic Journal, 15 October 1867, p.128.
6. The Photographic News, 7 July 1865, p. 313.
7. The Journal of the Photographic Society, 21 May 1855.
8. The Photographic News, 12 December 1884, p. 791.
9. The Photographic News, 7 July 1865, p. 313.
10. Walks in Palestine, by Henry A. Harper, London, 1894, p. 5.
11. The Photographic Journal, 7 October 1882, p. 12.
12. Coxwell and Glaisher's ascents were made under the sponsorship of The British Association for the Advancement of Science.
13. The British Journal of Photography, 23 June 1882, p. 352.
14. "A Photographic Trip to Cloud-Land", by Cecil V. Shadbolt, The British Journal of Photography, 23 June 1882, p. 354.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. "Experiences de M. C.-V. Shadbolt en Angleterre en 1883", La Photographie en Balloon, by Gaston Tissandier, 1886, pp. 19-20. Translated and quoted in Airborne Camera, by Beaumont Newhall, 1969, p. 36.
18. For confirmation, see the same picture's description in The British Journal of Photography, 23 June 1882, p. 353.
19. The British Journal of Photography, 23 June 1882, p. 352.
20. An unfair comparison. The Nadar photographs were made from a captive balloon, not a free-floating one.
21. 23 June 1882, p. 360.
22. The Photographic News, 11 May 1883, p. 303. This is a significant remark in that Lefevre, as President of the Balloon Society of Great Britain, was kept in touch with European efforts in balloon photography by the members of the French Academy, as well as those of the Berlin Aeronauting Society.
23. The Photographic News, 11 May 1883, p.304.
24. The Photographic News, 17 August 1883, p. 519.
25. The Photographic News, 22 August 1884, p. 543.
26. 17 October, p. 659.
27. This block is republished in The Photographic News, 27 February 1885, p. 134.
28. For example, "Exciting Balloon Adventure in Hyde Park", Morning Mail, July 1885.
29. The Times, 30 June 1892, p. 9.
30. The general consensus of opinion was that the fabric of the balloon (which had been constructed by Mrs. Dale from a previous craft) was rotten from having been rubbed with linseed oil and stored while wet. See The Times, 1892: 1 July, p.10; 4 July, p.11; 9 July, p. 5; 13 July, p.12.
31. Walks in Palestine, by H. A. Harper, London, 1894, p. 6.
32. From a photograph by Lavender of Bromley, Kent.
33. Harper's works included: The Palestine Pictorial Bible...With 116 engravings and coloured pictures from drawings...by... H. A. Harper, etc. (1906); The Pictorial New Testament...With Echromographs and engravings from drawings made in Bible lands by...H. A. Harper (1902); Land and the Bible...With...original illustrations by H. A.

Harper, etc. (1897); Strange Scenes (in Palestine)...40 original illustrations by H. A. Harper (1888);
An Artist's Walks in Bible Lands...With a photogravure frontispiece and fifty-five other illustrations, etc. Religious Tract Society: London (1901); The Bible and Modern Discoveries. With map and illustrations. A. P. Watt:London (1890); Illustrated letters to my children from the Holy Land. Eastern manners and customs depicted in... sketches from life. Religious Tract Society: London (1880); (With James Clark) Those Holy Fields; or, Pictures from Palestine. Scripture Gift Mission; London (1907).
34. The British Journal of Photography, 21 June 1901, p. 391.
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